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ABSTRACT

This study considers some aspects of "prisonization," or the process by which inmates adapt to confinement. Specifically, it further examines two ideas suggested by earlier studies. One is the belief that the structural characteristics of many prisons promote rather than inhibit assimilation into an inmate normative system that is opposed to the prison organization and many institutions of the larger society. The other considers the relations between inmates' preprison experiences, their contacts with the larger society during confinement, and their perceptions of their probable postrelease life chances. After presenting some theoretical considerations, the paper examines how effective indicators of these influences are in accounting for variance in observed levels of prisonization within the inmate population of a large maximum security federal penitentiary. (Author/BP)

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STRUCTURAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF PRISONIZATION

A Comparative Analysis*

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STRUCTURAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF PRISONIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed an impressive proliferation of both empirical and theoretical analyses of inmate social systems. Despite this continuing concern for advancing our understanding of inmate adaptations to confinement, our ability to account for varying degrees of normative assimilation within or between inmate populations remains far less sophisticated than the growing volume of literature might imply.

This shortcoming is attributable to several factors. The most general of these may well be that many of those with only a passing interest in this aspect of criminology have prematurely assumed that we already have reasonably sound explanations of what Clemmer (1940) termed a "prisonization" process. A review of the most commonly cited studies, however, shows that the precision of the predictions which they provide is weak (e.g., Wheeler, 1961; Garabedian, 1963; Glaser, 1964; Wellford, 1967). Still, this misplaced confidence has had the consequence of reducing interest in this area of inquiry. This problem has been further aggravated by the fact that the recent literature has proven quite repetitive. There have been few conceptual advances, and the inferences which might be drawn from some contemporary

research have not been adequately pursued.

The present study cannot correct these problems, but our more limited purposes do incorporate an attempt to follow two potentially important leads provided in prior studies of prisonization. One of these reflects the continuing belief that the structural characteristics of many prisons promote rather than inhibit assimilation into an inmate normative system that is oppositional to the prison organization, its representatives, and many of the institutions of the larger society. The other lead directs our attention away from the prison as an organization and toward the complex relationship that exists between the preprison experiences of inmates, their attachments to and contacts with the larger society during the period of their confinement, and their perceptions of their probable postrelease life chances. Our intent here will be to examine how effectively indicators of these influences are in accounting for variance in observed levels of prisonization within the inmate population of a large maximum security penitentiary operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Before doing so, however, the conceptual importance of the problem merits a somewhat more detailed consideration.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Until relatively recently theoretical developments in the sociology of corrections tended to revolve around one of two basic conceptual orientations, the "deprivation model"

and the "importation model." Detailed reviews of both are readily available elsewhere, so no detailed discussion is necessary here (e.g., Tittle, 1972; Thomas and Petersen, 1977). The central point that needs to be made is that each was initially assumed to be an alternative to the other. Too simply summarized, advocates of the deprivation model contended that the conditions of inmate life, particularly those encountered in custodially-oriented prisons, were sufficiently severe that the inmate society could be best understood as a response to structurally generated problems of confinement (Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Goffman, 1961). Those more closely associated with the development of the importation model argued against what they viewed as a narrow, closed-system perspective (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Wellford, 1967, Cline, 1968; Thomas and Foster, 1973; Thomas, 1977a). Instead, though these and other researchers differ a good deal on their points of emphasis, they argued that a broad spectrum of variables not directly associated with either the characteristics of the prison organization or the problems it posed for inmates are critically important determinants of inmate adaptations to prison life.

Fortunately, most students of corrections were quick to realize the importance of drawing these two conceptualizations together into a single more general model (Thomas, 1977a, 1977b; Akers et al., 1974; Tittle, 1974; Jensen and Jones, 1976; Thomas and Petersen, 1977). Because this more

inclusive explanation of prisonization is a synthesis of propositions that may be derived from the two more narrow models upon which it is based, a variety of new problems now confront researchers in this area. In particular, much of the previous research has been primarily concerned with qualitative descriptions or the testing of relatively simplistic hypotheses rather than the more demanding work associated with theory construction and verification. Consequently, we lack the types of multivariate analyses that are necessary if we are to fully appreciate the complex relationships that exist between prison-specific influences (the primary focus of the deprivation model), extraprison variables (the emphasis of the importation model), and prisonization (a major concern for both models). As has been noted elsewhere (Akers et al., 1974; Thomas, 1977a), it is especially important that we evaluate the relative importance of variables central to the two basic models and, in doing so, that we devote more attention to clarifying the conceptual tools these models provide.

It is toward these goals that the present analysis is directed. The analysis evaluates the explanatory power and relative importance of variables that play a central role in the emerging synthesis of the importation and deprivation models. One of these, contextual powerlessness, is a salient concern for those who emphasize the impact of structural variables on inmate adaptations. The general contention,

derived from Etzioni's (1975) elaboration of compliance theory, is that a variety of factors associated with the operative goals of prisons, the problematic nature of social control in prisons, and the pronounced lack of commitment to the prison organization among those who are quite obviously involuntary participants encourage the adoption of an organizational structure that relies on coercive power as a means of obtaining compliance with organizational directives. Etzioni (1975: 27) makes both the rationale for and the consequence of reliance on coercive power clear in his observation that:

> Coercive organizations are organizations in which coercion is the major means of control over lower participants and high alienation characterizes the orientation of most lower participants to the organization....Force is the major means of control applied...to assure fulfillment of the major organization task: keeping inmates in....all other tasks depend on the effective performance of this custodial task... the second major task...keeping the inmates disciplined, is also attained through the potential or actual use of force.

Etzioni's concerns, of course, are with the construction of a framework for the comparative analysis of complex organizations. Explicit applications of compliance theory

to studies of prison life have come largely through the work of Thomas. His work has shown the relevance of the alienative consequences of confinement in coercive, custodially-oriented institutions. Moreover, these results have been supported in separate studies of a maximum security penitentiary (Thomas, 1975, 1977b; Thomas and Poole, 1975), a medium security prison (Thomas, 1977a), and a facility for male delinquents (Thomas and Zingraff, 1976). In each case alienation was linked to high levels of prisonization.

The second focal point for this study reflects a concern for influences not associated with the structural characteristics of the prison and its impact on inmate adaptations. It is becoming increasingly obvious that patterns of prisonization cannot be properly interpreted when only prison-specific influences are examined. Instead, inmate evaluations of their future life-chances interact with one another in a fashion that cannot be understood when any one of the factors is examined separately.

Numerous researchers have recognized this problem. A series of related studies, for example, has focused on the interactive product of the position inmates presently occupy and anticipational influences by casting "phase of imprisonment" as an independent variable (e.g., Wheeler, 1961; Garabedian, 1963; Glaser, 1964; Wellford, 1967). Despite some contrary evidence (Atchley and McCabe, 1968; Thomas, 1975), these studies suggest that the relevance of the inmate

society, and the degree to which inmates are integrated into that system, is greatest when inmates are in the "middle-phase" of confinement. Perhaps more importantly, they show that inmates become less prisonized as they approach release from prison. Recent studies have attempted to pursue the implications of this set of findings by assessing inmates' evaluations of their postrelease life-chances. The general hypothesis advanced and consistently supported in these studies is that positive expectations reflect an extraprison variable which reduces the problems associated with confinement and, in turn, prisonization (e.g., Thomas and Foster, 1972; Thomas, 1977a, 1977b).

In short, a number of studies have shown that prisonization is partly a consequence of the alienative effects of prison organizations relying on coercive power and partly a product of inmate evaluations of their life-chances. Their utility, however, has been diminished by conceptual and methodological problems that we hope to avoid in this analysis. First, although alienation has been viewed as a reaction to the coercive control structure of the prison, it has often been measured in such a way that the referent for alienation is not clear. It is particularly important that we draw a clear distinction between generalized feelings of alienation, which may or may not be related to the structure of the prison organization, and alienation that is the product of involuntary participation in a coercive organization.

That distinction is made here by relying on a contextual rather than a societal or general measure of alienation.

Second, the importance of inmate expectations has been assessed by either attributing changes associated with phases of imprisonment to the influence of anticipatory socialization (e.g., Wheeler, 1961) or a unidimensional measure of the quality of inmate evaluations of their postrelease life-chances (e.g., Thomas and Foster, 1972; Thomas, 1977b). The problem with the former approach is that it assumes the presence of a causal variable without any attempt to measure its value. The latter method, while arguably more accurate, assumes that a given score on a measure of postrelease expectations has a similar meaning for all inmates. This neglects any consideration of whether inmates' expectations have changed as a consequence of confinement. This issue will be addressed here by incorporating both a measure of postrelease expectations comparable to that reported in earlier research and a measure of whether expectations, as measured by a multidimensional life-satisfaction variable, have been altered during the period of confinement.

Third, the necessary assessment of the relative importance of the indicators of structural and social psychological influences, which is not generally provided in earlier research, will be a by-product of the multiple regression method employed in this analysis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data reported here were obtained during the course of a larger study of a maximum security penitentiary that is one of the facilities operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. When the study was initiated this institution housed some 2,220 adult male felons, and a simple random sample of 440 inmates (20 percent of the total inmate population) was drawn shortly before the study began. Ninety of these were subsequently deleted from the sample (seventy-two were not in the institution during the course of the study; eighteen did not speak English), so the actual sample fraction was somewhat smaller (N = 354, roughly 15.6 percent of the total population). Three attempts were made to schedule interviews with each of these inmates. Forty-two inmates (11.9 percent) appeared for their interviews but refused to cooperate; seventy-three inmates (20.6 percent) did not appear or could not be scheduled for interviews, others were being held in segregation, numerous conflicts with other institutional activities were encountered, and so on.[1]

In any event, rather lengthy interviews were completed with 239 inmates (67.5 percent of the sample and 10.8 percent of the total inmate population). While the sample losses we encountered dictate that those interviewed not be viewed as a random sample, we have no reason to believe that it is not adequately representative. The operational measures derived from the structured portion of our interview sched-

ules are described below.

Alienation Many of those associated with alienation research have noted the importance of contextually specific measures (e.g., Neal and Seeman, 1964; Groat and Neal, 1967; Rosenbeck and Kutner, 1967, Martin et al., 1974), and recent prison research has demonstrated the utility of employing contextual measures of the powerlessness dimension of alienation (Thomas and Zingraff, 1976; Thomas, 1977a). To the extent that inmates feel that the structural arrangements of the institution deprive them of any meaningful degree of control over their lives, many of the other problems inherent in confinement are likely to be intensified and, in turn, the probability of prisonization is expected to increase. The five-item Likert-type measure employed in this study has a mean of 14.90 and a standard deviation of 2.64. The higher the scale score on this measure, the higher the alienation.

Postrelease Expectations and Life Satisfaction Prisonization research has shown that high levels of assimilation into the inmate normative system are particularly likely among those inmates who have negative expectations about their postrelease life-chances. Unfortunately, the complexity of these expectations has been totally ignored. The measures which have been reported emphasize perceptions of whether imprisonment is viewed as so stigmatizing that reintegration into family, social, and occupational roles is seen as unlikely. An eight-item measure quite similar to those employed in previous research was used in this study. It has a mean

of 29.01 and a standard deviation of 3.59. The higher the scale score on this variable, the more positive the post-release expectations.

Such a measure has several limitations. First, its unidimensional referent may reflect a perspective that is too narrow to adequately measure the multidimensional character of expectations about life-chances. Second, the quality of postrelease expectations has been viewed as an extra-prison variable which could either intensify or moderate the pressures associated with prison-specific influences. Consequently, measures capable of reflecting differences between how satisfied inmates were with their lives and life-chances prior to confinement and their future expectations might prove to be important. Research in other areas has certainly shown the relevance of life satisfaction measures, and seven of the most important dimensions of life satisfaction have also been noted elsewhere (e.g., Cantril, 1965; Clement and Sauer, 1976). Thus, our interviewers posed a series of questions to each inmate which were designed to measure how important each of these seven dimensions were to the inmate prior to his confinement, how satisfied he was with each, how important he felt each would be to him in the future, and how satisfied he felt he would be with each after release from prison. Responses to each dimension were scored on a three-point scale of importance (very important, important, not very important) and degree of satisfaction (well-satisfied, satisfied, not very satis-

fied). Measures of past and future life satisfaction were created by summing the products of the importance and degree of satisfaction responses across the seven dimensions of satisfaction considered (physical health, economic security, family relationships, friendships, personal character, social involvements, and religion). The difference between these two measures provides a measure of changing life satisfaction. The change in life satisfaction measure was scored in such a way that low scores reflect a negative change on this multidimensional index.

Prisonization Prisonization refers to the level of normative assimilation into the inmate subculture. Particularly in coercive, custodially-oriented penitentiary settings, the "inmate code" reinforces a set of attitudes which encourage inmate solidarity, physical toughness, and exploitative relationships with prison officials. The eight-item measure of this variable has a mean of 25.47 and a standard deviation of 4.36. The higher the scale score on this variable, the higher the prisonization.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The previous discussion suggests that prisonization is in part a response to the alienative consequences of involuntary participation in a coercively structured organization, negative postrelease expectations, and differences between past and projected levels of life satisfaction which imply a diminishing assessment of future life-chances. Contextual powerlessness, the operational measure of the alienation dimension, is viewed here as a direct effect of the struc-

ture of the prison; both postrelease expectations and changing levels of life satisfaction are cast as extraprison influences because neither are a direct response to the organizational characteristics of the prison. An obvious goal of the analysis is to determine whether each of these three variables is significantly associated with prisonization in the predicted direction. Beyond that, however, our intent is to determine whether each of these variables has a significant effect when the influence of the other two is held constant. Finally, we hope to provide an evaluation of the relative importance of these determinants of prisonization.[2]

The initial questions may be resolved in a reasonably straightforward fashion because of the small number of variables. The necessary statistical information is provided in Figure 1. The zero-order correlations presented in the upper portion of the figure support the prediction that each of these variables are significantly associated with both prisonization and one another. Further, the partial correlations at the base of the figure show that these linkages remain statistically significant when appropriate variables are held constant. The only exception to this is that the original relationship between changing life satisfaction and the alienation variable ($r = -.124$) is reduced to insignificance ($r = -.040$) when a control for the effect of postrelease expectations is introduced.

//INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE//

In interpreting these findings, several points merit emphasis. First, prisonization appears most likely among those whose anticipations regarding their future life-chances are negative and who are highly alienated on the contextual dimension reflected by the measure employed here. Second, to the extent that contextual powerlessness indicates one aspect of inmate responses to the conditions of confinement, the impact of prison-specific influences appears to be partly determined by extraprison variables. In particular, those holding negative evaluations of their future life-chances are a good deal more likely to become both alienated and prisonized than is true for those who, in effect, are insulated against such consequences of confinement by their more positive orientations toward the future. Thus, while the correlation between contextual powerlessness and prisonization ($r = .280$) provides support for those who emphasize the relevance of the structure of prison organizations, the analysis also shows that extraprison influences have both a direct and an indirect effect on prisonization. Finally, the changing life satisfaction measure was included in the analysis to determine whether declining expectations about future life-chances provide information not given by a more simplistic assessment of whether inmates view their prospects in positive or negative terms. Despite the weak to moderate correlations between the change variable and both postrelease expectations ($r = .255$) and prisonization

(r = -.192), our interpretation is that it does. It is, for example, indirectly related to prisonization through both contextual alienation and postrelease expectations. In addition, the partial correlations between it and prisonization remain significant when contextual powerlessness (r = -.165) and postrelease expectations (r = -.114) are held constant.

These zero- and first-order correlations provide answers to only some of the issues posed earlier. They do not, for example, reflect the proportion of variance in prisonization that can be attributed to these predictor variables. This, in turn, makes it impossible to determine the proportion of the explained variance that is attributable to prison-specific effects (contextual alienation) and extraprison influences (postrelease expectations and life satisfaction changes).

To puruse these two related issues the analysis was extended by incorporating the three independent variables into two multiple regression equations. In the first the two indicators of extraprison influences were forced into the equation on the first step and the measure of prison-specific effects was entered on the second step; in the second equation the order of entry was reversed. The order of entry has no influence on either the values of the standardized regression coefficients or the multiple correlation coefficient. When the independent variables are intercorrelated, however, the order of entry does obscure the proportion of variance that is accounted for by each variable. Consequently, the first equation was designed to determine

the proportion of variance in prisonization that could be attributed to contextual powerlessness after the two extra-prison variables had been taken into account; the second to determine the proportion of variance attributable to the extra-prison variables after contextual powerlessness had been entered. A comparison of the two equations provides a means of determining the relative as well as the total explanatory power of the predictor variables.

The resulting regression equations reveal a moderate multiple correlations coefficient (R = .400), and the net standardized regression coefficients for contextual alienation (Beta = .178), postrelease expectations (Beta = -.260), and the life satisfaction variable (Beta = -.104) are all statistically significant. Stated a bit differently, while these three variables explain only a moderate proportion of the variance in prisonization, each has a significant impact on the dependent variable when the other two are held constant. This is consistent with the conclusions drawn from the previous segment of the analysis, but it goes further by suggesting that the postrelease expectations variable has a greater influence than does contextual powerlessness which, in turn, is more influential than changing life satisfaction.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This analysis, which is based on data obtained through interviews with 239 inmates confined in a federal, maximum-security penitentiary, provides an evaluation of the effect

of both prison-specific and extraprison variables on patterns of inmate adaptation to confinement. The research problem is of special theoretical significance because it reflects an attempt to assess the relative importance of influences central to two models that many feel can be drawn together as a single more inclusive, more powerful paradigm.

Although any interpretation of the findings must be approached with caution because of the moderate proportion of the variance in prisonization that was explained, they show that both prison-specific and extraprison variables are directly linked to prisonization. Further, they suggest that the problems and pressures associated with confinement, as measured here by levels of contextual alienation, may be either lessened or intensified by influences not directly associated with the organizational characteristics of the prison.

Much of the significance of any study must, of course, come from an assessment of how it relates to previous research and whether it provides anything of relevance for those concerned with theory construction in an area of inquiry. For a variety of reasons, that evaluation is generally best left to those familiar with the state of our knowledge in this area. Still, while our observations are necessarily a bit speculative, a few general concluding remarks might serve to outline the position we view as most tenable in light of this and related analyses.

Most generally, both this study and several comparable analyses should serve to make one point quite obvious. Any who wish to continue a debate over whether responses to confinement are a product of either the immediate problems of confinement or influences far removed from the prison setting are almost certainly debating a dead issue. Neither set of variables is capable of adequately explaining inmate adaptations. Consequently, any further research directed toward determining whether the deprivation model is more or less powerful than the importation model would strike us as redundant. The more relevant issue appears to be how the rather vague propositions associated with each model can be stated more precisely and, more importantly, how they can be merged into a single theoretical framework.

Second, moving toward this end will continue to be a tedious undertaking if the too simplistic statements of the two basic theoretical models are relied upon as frequently in the future as has been the case in the past. In particular, and a point made indirectly in this analysis, those who understand the importation model to be a perspective which asserts that preprison experiences and socialization are the dominant determinants of prisonization are arguably in error. The scope of that model also includes such related variables as those which reflect the quality and quantity of inmate contacts with the larger society, perceptions of postrelease life-chances, and a broad spectrum of other

influences that are neither a direct product of confinement in a particular prison setting nor subject to direct manipulation by prison officials.

In short, we appear to have identified several sets of variables that are associated with prisonization and, perhaps, the consequences of that process. They clearly cross over any artificial limits that would be imposed were we to rely on either the deprivation or importation model. Some, largely those associated with the deprivation model, reflect the problems and pressures linked to processing by the criminal justice system and confinement in a particular type of organization. Others, which are more emphasized by the importation model, focus on preprison experiences that tend to increase the likelihood of prisonization by reducing the social distance between the attitudes and values of newly arrived inmates and those already well-integrated into the inmate society. Still others appear to play a dual role by both influencing responses to the problems of confinement and degrees of prisonization. Our feeling is that studies of the type reported here are important because they reflect attempts to assess the magnitude of the influence exerted by one or more of these sets of variables and, in doing so, to determine the nature of their interrelationships with one another.

FOOTNOTES

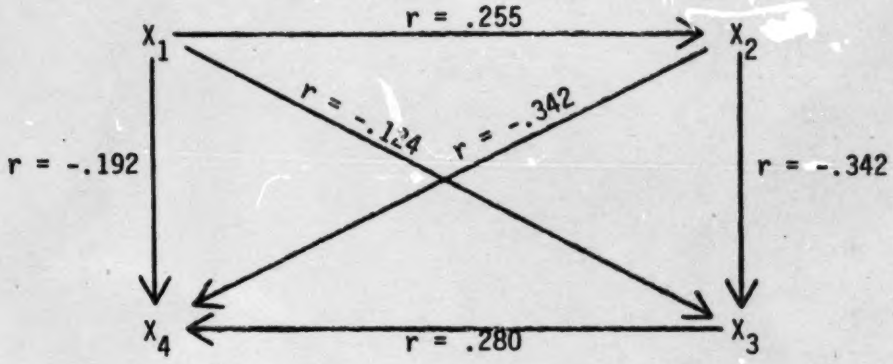
1. Relative to previous reports based on research in maximum security facilities, the sample attrition here is not excessive. We had, in fact, drawn a larger sample than we felt was necessary because we anticipated even larger losses. This expectation was based on two considerations. First, and unlike most previous research, the data were obtained through lengthy structured interviews. Because it was necessary to conduct these interviews during normal working hours, it seemed likely that we would encounter a broad spectrum of scheduling conflicts that would not have been a salient concern had we arranged to administer a questionnaire to large groups of inmates. Second, the purposes of the larger study required that a substantial number of questions about illicit drug use within the penitentiary be posed. Whenever such sensitive issues are being explored in research on populations of this type, sample losses can be substantial. Thus, on balance, our feeling, though necessarily speculative, is that the sample is representative and that our reliance on structured interviews significantly enhanced the quality of the data we obtained.

2. Because this analysis is based on a relatively small and selective set of variables there will certainly be some who will quite properly question the absence of controls for such variables as age, race, type of offense, and so on. Indeed, our initial intent had been to incorporate such controls, the criteria for choosing them being a zero-order correlation between a potential control variable and both one or more of

the independent variables and the dependent variable that was significant at or less than the .001 level. An inspection of a correlation matrix which included each of the variables being considered in this analysis plus age, race, marital status, educational attainment, total years in prison, years served on present sentence, and type of offense revealed that none met this inclusion criteria.

FIGURE 1

SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION OF THE PREDICTED LINKAGES BETWEEN CHANGING LIFE SATISFACTION (X1), POSTRELEASE EXPECTATIONS (X2), CONTEXTUAL POWERLESSNESS (X3), AND PRISONIZATION (X4) WITH BOTH THE RELEVANT ZERO-ORDER AND PARTIAL CORRELATIONS



Partial Correlations

X1X3.X2 = -.040	X2X3.X1 = -.323	X3X4.X1 = .263
X1X4.X2 = -.114	X2X4.X1 = -.314	X3X4.X2 = .183
X1X4.X3 = -.165	X2X4.X3 = -.279	

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